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ABSTRACT

In order to evaluate the possibility that open education represents a revival of the progressive education movement, data were gathered on the attitude of experienced teachers toward open, progressive, and traditional educational practices. An attitude scale composed of 70 items was administered to a sample of 64 program assistants in the Tucson Early Education Model (TEEM). The data were analyzed through correlational procedures and indicate the high similarity between open education and progressive education, differing only n the respect that open education is less traditional. Among the implications of these data would be the importance of considering the frustrations and problems encountered by the proponents of progressive education. (Author/MLF)

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An Empirical Study of Attitudes Toward Open Education

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Over the past eighteen months there has been an upsurge of interest in what is called open or informal education. Many professional educators appear ready to join this latest bandwagon even though much confusion exists concerning the nature and meaning of open education approaches. This paper represents one effort to clarify the meaning of open education, and further suggests that the roots of open education are to a great extent in the American progressive education movement as well as in the more recent British infant school model.

The wave of interest in this topic as well as confusion about it is reflected in the large number of recent articles written about the "integrated day", "Leicestershire Plan", "informal classroom", and of course open education. The potential confusion is compounded by the use of similar or identical terms like "open space" schools or "open classroom" which sometimes refer to open education and at other times describe a minor architectural innovation of building schools with few or no interior walls.

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A number of [1] authorities on open education have attempted to clarify the meaning of the term by providing statements of philosophy, psychological assumptions, and classroom practices (Barth, 1971, and Walberg and Thomas, 1972). The cardinal features of open education approaches involve a set of assumptions about the fundamental nature of children, how learning can best be promoted, and the nature of knowledge. Briefly, proponents of open education generally believe that children are innately curious and intrinsically motivated to learn; that children will pursue worthwhile activities in the classroom if provided diverse materials and sufficient freedom; that children have the capability (and right) to make significant decisions about the what, when, and how of learning; and that children will cooperate with and learn from peers if allowed to pursue meaningful activities. Moreover, open educators reject the traditional subject matter orientation in favor of a more integrated or orchestrated approach to academic skill development. Also rejected are such practices as grouping children according to ability, evaluation of learning on a normative basis, and the usual product (as opposed to process) orientation of the curriculum.

[1] An authority on open education is operationally defined as a person who purportedly has been in England studying infant schools.

In terms of assumptions about children, learning, and curriculum, the developing open education movement is highly similar to the American progressive education movement of the 1920s and 30s. The Dewey inspired progressive education movement represented an effort to build a curriculum emanating from the child's natural interests with an emphasis upon inquiry (process) skills rather than ~~mostly~~ mastery of basic facts, concepts, or principles. Because of these and other parallels it would appear that rather than being new, open education represents a revival of the progressive education movement. In order to evaluate this possibility data were gathered on the attitude of experienced teachers toward open, progressive, and traditional educational practices.

METHOD

Kerlinger (1958 and 1966) reported the development of 15 item scales measuring attitudes toward progressive and traditional educational practices. The construct of progressivism was defined as having emphases in educational settings upon problem solving skills, children's interests and needs, warmth in social relations, and education as an instrument of social change. In contrast to the above, traditionalism refers to

emphases upon subject matter for its own sake, the hierarchial nature of teacher (superior) - student (inferior) relationships, moral training, and firm discipline in the classroom.

A 40 item attitude scale relating to open education was developed by the authors from a set of 30 statements about children, learning, and knowledge that open educators generally endorse (Barth, 1971). ~~All 30 statements in original form~~ Ten of the original 30 statements were judged as inappropriate for use on an attitude inventory due to excessive overlap with other statements or in two cases, because the statements were judged to be so innocuous that no one would disagree with them. The remaining 20 statements were generally reworded, and then a reversal of the statement written thus yielding the 40 item scale.

The combined scales (open, progressive, and traditional) composed of 70 items were then administered to a sample of 64 program assistants in the Tucson Early Education Model (TEEM). The program assistants were in Tucson in the summer of 1972 as participants in a summer training program. TEEM is an open education model that is used in the local Follow Through programs in 19 communities throughout the United States. All members of the sample had one or more years of teaching experience in TEEM classrooms. Responses to each attitude statement were recorded on a six-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

RESULTS

The data were analyzed through correlational procedures (See Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1
Intercorrelation of the Three Scales

	Open	Traditional	Progressive
Open	1.0	- .66*	.63*
Traditional		1.0	- .39*
Progressive			1.0

* $p \leq .01$

Table 2
Intercorrelations of the Three Scales:
Corrected for Attenuation

	Open	Traditional	Progressive
Open	1.0	- .82	+ .80
Traditional		1.0	- .50
Progressive			1.0

Table 2 represents the correlations after correction for attenuation; i.e. the theoretical correlations among the constructs if measured by perfectly reliable instruments. These indices indicate the high similarity between open education and progressive education, differing only in the respect that open education is even less traditional.

These relationships might be seen on the following continuum:

These data appear to confirm the hypothesized similarity of open and progressive education. Among the implications of these data would be the importance of considering the frustrations and problems encountered by the proponents of progressive education. The two movements, while separated historically, have many similarities. By becoming sensitive to the problems which eventually led to the decline of progressive education, the contemporary advocates of open education may perhaps be able to make a more lasting contribution to American educational practices.

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